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Art
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[Robinson, Percy J.]

The Group of Seven.

Acta Victoriana

JANUARY

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1923

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VOL. XLVII.

NO. IV.

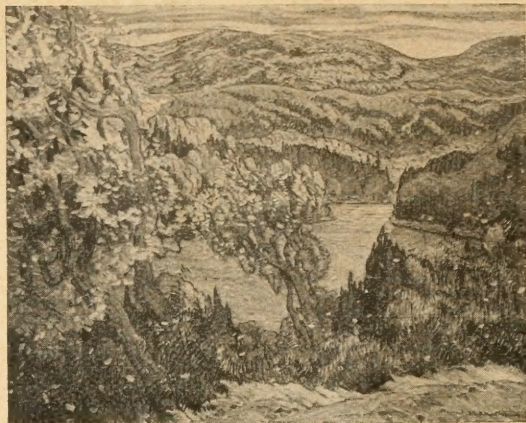
Appreciations

We wish to express thanks to Mr. Percy J. Robinson of the Mail and Empire, for his most interesting article on the Group of Seven, with whose ideals and accomplishments Mr. Robinson has been familiar for several years. He has also

secured illustrations to accompany the article.

Professor Robins has very kindly given us one of his real "human interest" stories which we know will be welcomed by all our readers.

The pleasurable task of reporting the great Student Conference was undertaken by J. G. Endicott '23 and R. L. Wilson '22. They have given us a very clear representation of this conference.



THE FALL OF THE LEAF

By J. E. H. Macdonald.



GEORGIAN BAY, NOVEMBER

By A. G. Jackson.

Art
Paint
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Acta Victoriana

VICTORIA COLLEGE, UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO

The Group of Seven

[by Percy J. Robinson]

THE making of pictures is an instinct as ancient as the Caveman and as modern as the modern child. Unhappily this universal instinct remains with the majority only as instinct. Children draw spontaneously. On arriving at maturity, obedient to instinct, they include pictures in the furnishings of their houses; but just as children rarely continue the practice of drawing until the critical faculties awake, so very rarely are pictures chosen for a house with as much taste as wall paper and carpets. Though the love of art is universal the power to select according to conscious principle or to discriminate according to correct canons of taste is as rare as is the fine flower of any of the virtues. When it comes to explaining the motives or defending the aims of a new movement in art the task is indeed difficult. Added

to the widespread ignorance of aesthetics there is the fact that originality in any of the arts is generally welcomed on the one hand by irrational enthusiasm and assailed on the other by equally irrational hostility. The Group of Seven have received a great deal of adulation, they have also received a great deal of quite uncritical execration. This article is an attempt to indicate the lines upon which an intelligent estimate of their achievements may be made.

There is scarcely a room in any house without pictures. They are there because the departmental store sold them; because they recall familiar scenes, or the faces of friends, or to go a step higher because they portray an historic event, or suggest a pleasant sentiment, or arouse a religious emotion; or they are there because they are reproductions of famous masterpieces

of acknowledged merit, or because they are old prints that have a value from the collector's point of view. Very few are the houses where pictures have been chosen solely because they are beautiful. There are indeed very few people who have recognized that the painter's art has a far more serious purpose than the painting of decorative oblongs to fill spaces in an empty wall. Of course there are reasons for this lack of critical appreciation of art in Canada. There are no galleries like the Louvre or the National Gallery to illustrate the progress and growth of art from century to century. Added to this the Anglo-Saxon race has always been timid in trusting its artistic judgment. Somehow or other there has sprung up in Canada the opinion that art is a set of rules deduced from masterpieces; that correct art is to imitate the great artists. There has been an almost complete failure to recognize the purpose and intention of anything original and especially the ideals of this young school. They are called daubers and feeble adventurers and it is denied that progress is possible except in adhering strictly to a beaten path.

It is to be feared that those who are most hostile to the progressive spirit in art are hostile because they do not desire originality and progress; they are afraid of it as of something revolutionary; and they would like to curb all this youthful creative impulse and subdue this audacity into a soulless humility and a meek following of the great masters of other lands and other ages. Happily the great masters are never to be followed in that way.

It is important to recognize that the whole history of art has been a history of revolution and adventure. Even those we now admit to unchallenged supremacy were in their day regarded as radicals. Constable is one of these and Cezanne is

another. How could it be otherwise? The artist will never be born who will employ in his art all the elements which combine to render a picture effective. One school will emphasize colour, another drawing, another perspective, another composition, another subject matter, another technique of one kind or another, but no one artist has ever exhausted the methods by which a picture may interest the spectator. An artist may have no colour sense and yet he may interest by his drawing; another may neglect drawing and produce rhapsodies of colour; a third may charm with the felicitous arrangement of his figures or with some innovation in technique. And in technique there is no fixed standard. An artist may paint with his brush or with his thumb provided he secures his effect. As to colour there is no better reason for Japanese art preferring black and white and considering bright colours vulgar than there is for the impressionists refusing to use black at all and employing only the colours of the spectrum.

The whole history of art is a history of a shifting of the point of emphasis. No one age can paint like any other age any more than a dozen artists set to paint the same model will ever produce identical copies. Their pictures will be as different as their individualities for each artist will paint not only with his eye and hand but with his memory and his temperament. Unconsciously he will paint into his picture the background of his life and of his age.

And so art never can repeat. But weak artists may copy the methods and the technique of others though they never can borrow the spirit. That is why art is not art if it is not original. That is why the highest art must always be a little different and a picture may be flawless in every respect but if it lack originality of some kind it is bad art. A

good picture is one that has passed through the fire of the imagination and without this it is a dead thing. It is idle then to expect artists in the future to paint like the masters of the past.

Art like fashion must change. There must be novelty or there is no interest. Perhaps more than in any other art the excellence of painting is in originality. No painting that is a copy is ever hung in an exhibition. In music there is a place for the musician who interprets but

group tells lies about Nature. This critic would be within the truth if he had asserted that the lies the new school tell about Nature are not the same lies that the old school has been repeating over and over till they have been accepted by a credulous public as truths. Even the camera cannot tell the whole truth. The minute an artist takes pen or pencil or brush or etching needle in his hand he must strike a bargain with certain conventions. He is forced to tell certain



Morning
by Lawren S. Harris



The Big Rock, Bon Echo
by Arthur Lismer

does not compose. In art the mere copyist commands no respect. Since originality is the very essence of pictorial art the conservatism of those who would bind Canadian art to a technique supposed to be traditional or a method of treatment supposed to be classic must arise from ignorance or hostility. From ignorance if the spirit of adventure and experiment in all past art is denied; from hostility if there is a refusal to admit that Canadian artists ought to give expression and interpretation to the Canadian spirit.

Obviously the Japanese and Chinese were as correct in building a school of art founded on one set of conventions as the Italians were in selecting another set of conventions. A recent critic of modern art in general and the Group of Seven in particular asserts that this particular

lies in order to tell certain truths. He must select the truths he wishes to tell and the rest will inevitably be compromise and paradox. It is so in all arts. Literal truth is impossible. Sincerity and honesty of purpose are another thing.

The artist like Railton or Partridge or Gibson who depicts nature with a pen will represent a shadow by lines, which is quite contrary to truth. But lines are his convention and although there are no lines in nature but only contiguous areas of colour, yet in black and white and with endless hatchments a measure of truth will be told. On the other hand the artist who selects a brush and a palette of colours will be forced to exclude certain elements of line and detail legitimate for the pencil or the pen. The special convention of a picture may be truth to the

laws of perspective, or the laws of perspective may be ignored and another interest substituted. There is no reason why colour should be applied sparingly any more than in quantities. The one method or convention will secure one set of effects—the other method another. Velasquez could not draw a horse. Mr. Fred Haines can. He is not therefore a better or worse artist than Velasquez. Turner could not draw the human figure. Mr. Fred Challener can. Turner is not therefore a better or worse artist than Mr. Challener, only different. Raphael and few of the early Italians could draw a tree or landscape. It is no reproach to them. They could have learned to do so had they wished. Modern landscape artists do not generally excel in historical pictures but they could learn to do so if they wished. At present the absorbing interest in painting is colour. The artists of a century ago could not tell you the correct colour of the shadow of a green tree in a brown field on a bright day though they might paint the shadow correctly by intuition and observation. Discoveries are still being made as to the mutual effect and value of colours when placed in a frame. There is a new liberty in the matter of chiaroscuro. Optics and psychology have not yet said the last word. The whole subject of the emotional value of colour lies unexplored. How impossible from every point of view to bind art to the old conventions. At the present as was said the other day, "Nothing at Paris interests in art but the novel and the unusual; and towards cubism, futurism and all other extremer forms of originality the proper attitude is not hostility but a watchful toleration".

Now our own group of adventurers are not extremists. They are doing nothing that is not being done in every art centre in the world. It is only that they are applying new methods to new material.

We have tried to show that no art is good art which does not aim to be original; that only feeble artists are content with already explored methods and subjects; that any set of conventions may be legitimately employed, and that certain results may be expected from one set of conventions and certain other results from another set; that artistic truth is never literalism; that art does not depend upon the subject but upon the treatment of the subject; that a picture is what the mind sees as well as what the eye sees. Everything points in the same direction. It is folly to condemn the Group of Seven because they do not paint as their predecessors painted. The real condemnation lies in the fact that at the moment the Group of Seven seems to be the only group of adventurers at work in Canada. Their merit lies not in their achievement alone though this is great, but in their point of view. They do not insist that their conventions are the only conventions. For the time being they are experimenting within the range of certain methods which seem specially adapted to interpret the most typical Canadian scenery to Canadians in an original and forceful manner. If I understand them aright they do believe that art that is feebly imitative is unworthy of this great young country and they have made many of us feel that artists whose sole aim is technical proficiency in methods perfected years ago are hardly creative artists at all. Certainly such artists will never accomplish work that will be worthy of the new spirit of a new land.

It is of course necessary to understand quite clearly what *are* the conventions of the Group of Seven. These have been frequently explained. First they are interested in colour problems and prefer strong pure colours to faint and elusive shades. Secondly they prefer a broad treatment to, attention to unmeaning de-

tail. Thirdly they prefer to summarize rather than to adhere to a literal interpretation. Fourthly they insist upon a vigorous and novel patterning of the subject matter of the composition. Fifthly they have a tendency to sacrifice aerial perspective to colour and design. They are strongly interested in silhouette and the quality of line. Sixthly, since they all paint in oils they have been exploring the possibilities of oil colour applied freely and without medium, a method quite as legitimate as another other. Seventhly, in subject matter they have avoided what is sentimental, and confining themselves largely to landscape they have selected the stronger rather than the gentler themes.

Now granting these conventions their pictures are quite easy to understand. And though the merits of individual pictures may be disputed, the general principles of the movement can hardly be contested.

Whither it will all lead is another question. When art bursts its bonds the usual sequence is that custom and uncritical practice reassert themselves after a time until another revolt occurs. French art from David and the Revolution to the latest of the moderns illustrates this truth. With every burst towards freedom there is a gain in variety and a clearer apprehension of the true nature of art.

It is not to be expected that the Group of Seven will remain stationary. When the movement began there was a distinct-

ly decorative quality in their work. There was a conscious interest in pattern and design and an attempt to interpret Canadian landscape through wealth of patterning. Added to this there was a love of bright colors; and these two tendencies resulted in a certain flatness. There is now a still further development. A third dimension has been introduced and form distinct from pattern but not replacing it has been added. The older painters thought this effect was to be secured by blurring distant horizons and this they called aerial perspective. Probably some sacrifice of brilliant color may be necessary, but it is worth while to attack the old problem in a new way.

So much for the methods and technique of the new school. The spirit and intention are another matter. To many they seem to embody the largeness, the vagueness, the independence, the self-reliance, the strength



Dr. J. H. Cameron.

By F. H. Varley

and the sincerity of the young spirit of Canada at its best. Much that I would like to say about the spirit of their work has been better said though in an exaggerated paradoxical way by James Stevens, writing on another theme, in an article in the *October Century*. Much that might be said about the mutability of art and the necessity of each generation discovering its own interpreters is well said by Henry Buckle on p. 383 of the third volume of his *History of Civilization*.

Those whose conception of art is static will never find a place for the Group of Seven. On the other hand those who are willing to define the academic in art as a form of excellence from which life has departed, will readily enroll themselves among their admirers. To sum up; the point that I have tried to make is that the difference between good art and bad art is that one is dead and the other is alive. Creative art must keep pace with life. Life never rests but advances with

continual change. The poets of yesterday do not speak to to-day with the same voice with which they spoke of their contemporaries. Every age needs its own art. The question is not so much is our art moving in the right direction, rather we must ask is it moving at all?

Art and literature must venture greatly to attain a distant goal:

Pictoribus atque poetis quidlibet audendi semper fuit aequa potestas.

Percy J. Robinson.

The Terror By Night

YASS, they is somepin' kinder queer 'bout them there links. They ain't human, somehow.—You take bear er wolf an' they ain' nice ter meet up wid,—but they's kinder human.—But that there link, he sounds shivery, fus' kinder callin' lak, lak a li'l baby kinder cryin' an' sobbin' in the big bush fer its ma,—an' then yellin' at the en' lak forty 'leven tom-eats yowlin to oncet,—an' that ain' human."

Mrs. Cannon shivered. She and old Doc Cannon were further north than most colored people go, and the autumn nights in Madowessi were growing sharp. Her guest glanced up uneasily at the clock, and made as if to speak. But the old woman forestalled him.

"Now doan' you go an' git in no hurry, Mistah McKissock. My ol' man 'll be moseyin' 'long any minute now, an' he won' never git over it ef I was up an' tell him that Miss Ben Jeeks' nevvu was up heah fum Windsor an' brung wu'd of our Jinny, an' he ain' see you.—Jinny thinks a pow'ful sight of yo ma to wu'k fer."

The visitor, being very young, and still

chivalrous, subsided again into the calico covered arm chair. Mrs. Cannon made another valiant attempt to close the box-stove door on a huge chunk of wood.

'Taint bu'n 'nough yit, I reckons.—That ol' man am that shiftless an' owdacious.—He might jes' well's not cut that stick right lenk.—But no, that ol' nigger think he only twin brother to Ol' Man Know-All, he do.—But nevemine."

She hitched her chair over close to her visitor's and lowered her voice, while her eyes rolled white with fear.

"You know what I 'spicions 'bout them there links.' I tell you.—My gran' ma she come from Missouri, an' she done tol' me 'bout them painters.—Them painters is debbils, an' dey kills yo' an' eats yo'—an' fum dat day on y' po' soul 'blige ter foller dat painter, foller, foller, an' do his du'ty wuk fo'm till 'e gits done wid yo' an' den—(She was moaning now.)—den dey eats yo' soul.—Mistah McKissock, I b'lieves in my sol dem links is nigh kins to dem painters!"

Angus McKissock was white, and in the Fifth Form in Windsor Collegiate, and in the daytime and most times he despised

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